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The Good Life for Non-Human Animals: What Virtue Requires of Humans

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The more clearly we see the differences between animals and stones or machines or plastic dolls, the less likely it seems that we ought to treat them in the same way.

Mary Midgley, *Animals and Why they Matter*, p. 14

INTRODUCTION

Most of us have seen giant polar bears lying in the sun behind the high fence of a mid- to large-sized enclosure in a zoo. This zoo could be in nearly any big city in the world. The enclosure has cement floors and a pool for swimming. Or maybe we have seen great apes behind the glass of a viewing cage. In the cage are a few trees and some play equipment. The apes engage one another or look out silently from behind the glass or may even gesture at us as we look in at them. While children are simply fascinated by the sight of these animals, for adults these sights are sometimes troubling. Perhaps we even have mixed feelings about our unease. We are delighted like the children about having the opportunity to see these great creatures without the necessity of traveling to their habitats and pleased moreover about the children learning to appreciate them by getting a chance to see them in 'real life'. Yet there is also something unsettling about the experience. And, to this same extent, there is the additional worry that the children's appreciation of these creatures will be misguided by the experience.¹

Perhaps the only language that we are able to use to express our unease is, 'It is against the ape (or polar bear's) right to be so confined!' But what if we aren't sure that apes and polar bears have rights like this? Perhaps then we will resort to a claim like, 'Look, it is clear that the animal must be suffering.' But what if we become convinced by the animals' caretaker that the animals are content, fed better there than they would be in the wild and moreover, less likely to suffer from injury or sickness? Are we to go away quietly having all our fears answered? Not necessarily. That is because there is room for a quite different kind of concern.

¹ For an argument against zoos that makes a similar point but not specifically about children, see Dale Jamieson's (1994) 'Against Zoos'.